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A-ONE #0940 10/05/07

~ eBay Urges Net Tax Ban ~ People Are Talking! ~ Puppy Linux Out!
~ New Phishing Defense? ~ National Telework Week ~ France vs. Spam!
~ Online Videos Viruses ~ Atari 2600 Turns 30! ~ Lexmark Rewards!

~ "E-mail Free" Fridays? ~ Non-English Domains! ~ 'Booze Cruise'!

-* California Web Domain Pulled *-
-* Americans Wrong About PC Security! *-
-* Spam-Scam Crackdown Nets Billions In Fakes *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, it's been really hectic the past couple of weeks. I had some ideas to discuss this week, including my own comments regarding Joe's editorial last week. But, I just plain ran out of time this week to really get my comments down on paper. So, I'll work on that for next week, and let you move ahead to the rest of this week's issue.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, we may finally have enough messages to do a decent column. No promises, but we're going to give it a shot.

Before we get to that though (and you just KNEW that there was going to be a 'but first...', didn't you? [grin]), I'd like to reply to a few people who emailed me about last week's column. Normally I reply in private, but given that last week's topic was something that I think everyone should be involved in, ie: the exploration of space, I decided to do it here.

Now, I realize I've got to be careful here so that I don't do something that always ticked me off about my stint with... well, with that other weekly Atari-related online news magazine that we were affiliated with: The tendency to use editorials to get the last word in. It always seemed to me to be unfair.

For those of you who missed it, or who've forgotten the topic, last week I talked about NASA's Chief Administrator, Michael Griffin, and his intonation that the United States should get used to the idea that China was going to beat us back to the Moon, and that we should just deal with it.

Most of the emails I received were quite complimentary, which always

makes me uneasy. One of my favorite English teachers always said that if you're getting uniformly good feedback, you're probably not getting your ideas across. Damn, Mrs. Daily, I hope you're wrong.

The few dissenting opinions I did receive, I'm happy to say, were well thought out, cogent opinions, not hysterical or self-serving diatribes. I'm a bit surprised, though, that no one thought to ask what the heck talk about space travel and national pride had to do with computers in general, and Atari computers in particular. The short answer is: nothing. Perhaps people have just grown accustomed to my rambling on and my ranting and raving.

Probably the most prevalent opinion was that space exploration is expensive. I agree. Many things are expensive. Social Security is expensive. Maintaining the national infrastructure is expensive. Medicare is expensive. Supporting education, defending civil rights, ensuring equal governmental representation, monitoring health... all expensive propositions. But we do these things because there is generally agreed to be a benefit in doing so. Even though we may not see immediate benefits, we believe that there will be a 'payoff' down the road. Money spent on what we collectively call "The Space Program" may result in better, cheaper, more durable materials, scientific advancement, discoveries about the Universe we live in, manufacturing processes that allow for more effective or more easily produced medicines... who knows what awaits us 'out there'? One thing is for sure; if we don't try, we'll never know.

When Columbus set out to find a new trade route to China, he stumbled upon the Americas. He hadn't been looking for the new world, he'd simply been looking to get to the old world faster. While it's true that Columbus played up the idea that these new world 'savages' could become slaves... and ended up being considered an abject failure... his discovery made possible all that we have today.

Another thing to think about is that this discovery was fueled not by private business concerns, but by a government. Queen Isabella of Spain (and by extension, the government of Spain) provided the ships and supplies to mount this excursion. Because the results weren't what the benefactor had anticipated, funding was stopped, and this discovery was bounced back and forth between the major powers of Europe for generations. During that time, resources were plundered, indigenous inhabitants were wronged not only by being conscripted and subjugated, but by being exposed to exotic new biological agents which they had never encountered before, and therefore had no resistance to.

All of these things could have analogues in space exploration, and we'll make the same mistakes all over again if we're not careful. I'm not too worried about making Martians serve as field workers, I think it'd be a terrible loss to science if we caused the downfall of any sort of life we might come across on other planets or satellites because we either didn't know that they existed, or didn't care. We have the capacity to learn from our mistakes, and if we are mindful of our our responsibilities we can accomplish great things.

Well, this has gone on longer than I had planned on, so I'm going to stop here and get to the news and stuff from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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’Mark’ asks about an FTP server to run in conjunction with MiNT:

"What ftp server program do you suggest?
I’ll need to configure it so that the outside world can’t access it.

I just installed magxnet, with magic 5.0.4 on a Falcon. (I swapped the HD, so the mint setup is not lost). I was thinking about trying it with bnet. I’ve already tested ’smbclient’, and I got it working. However, the hard disk (or computer) hangs with transferring files with sizes >1mb. Under mint and the same hardware I’ve never had that problem. On the other hand, smbclient is much faster under magic than under mint. Transfer time is the same, but logging on takes a while under mint."

Edward Baiz tells Mark:

"There is only one ftp server I know of for the Atari. It should be on most Atari ftp sites. I think it is just called FTP Server... It is a simple program and not too hard to setup unlike the PC one."

’Techman’ asks for advice on some 1980’s vintage floppies for his 130XE:

"I recently went home to my parents house and found 2 bins of 5-1/4 disks from the mid-80s for my Atari 130XE (although I can’t find the computer and hard drive right now).

I miss all of these games and applications. More importantly I miss many of the programs in basic I wrote. I truly wonder if all of the data is destroyed (it has been almost 20 years).

Has anyone found old disks from their Atari that survived such a long time? Is there a way I can verify if the data is still preserved using a 5-1/4 disk drive from an IBM PC? Even better if I can find a way to recover the data if possible and copy it onto a new 5-1/4 disk, preserving the file format etc. I would looking to understand my options."

Russ G. tells Techman:

"You need to remember what floppy drive you had. Your BASIC programs could be on single, enhanced or double density. You probably had a 1050, XF551 or some other party drive. If you don’t remember, then get a double density drive, it will do all three formats. You will need to find your 130XE and drive setup. There is a 10502PC or something like that adapter to read floppies directly to PC from a Atari floppy drive. What you might want to do is send the disks to someone to test and copy for you. Probably wouldn’t want to make new 5 1/4" copies, but copy to .ATR images, which you could then use in a PC Atari emulator. You could also copy the files from floppy to an .ARC file."

Steve Stupple adds:

"Fortunately there is more space on ye olde 5.25 disks so the datastream isn’t as compacted.

The 1050 drive wasn’t a true double density:(but 1.5. You would need dos 2.5 at least, I would think.

As with backing disks up, the best way would be to use an 8-bit machine, ideally 130xe for the extra memory. Transfer it using taritalk or something similar to the ST.

The st can work with 5.25 disk so if you have my favourite happy cart, you can copy 5.25 to 5.25, well do whatever you want with it as you would any other disk.

I did produce disk back up software (that could correct some crc errors, typical disk copy protection technique of the time), along with tape to disk when I wrote "the mockingbird menu" system. unfortunately I lost all my source in a house fire in the later 80’s:(page 6 library was sent copies, as in the pd, along with a few others, whether they have survived is another matter.

I was building up my 8-bit stuff as I did enjoy programming those machines. Jury’s still out at the moment.."

’Charlie’ adds:

"well I am no pro with the 130 xl , but my suggestion would be to join this group and ask for answers there, I am a member, a lot of people help, some don’t. http://www.atari-forum.com/index.php "

’Guillaume’ posts:

"I just bought a 520 STe which works ok except for one thing :
The sound output (on the video plug) is very weak compared to my other STe. I bet it’s a common issue like a nearly dead decoupling condensor somewhere between the YM chip and the output (WIIIILD GUESS). Any help, service guide or even schematics is welcomed!"

Roger Burrows tells Guillaume:

"Try: http://dev-docs.atariforge.org/index.htm "

Guillaume tells Roger:

"Now that’s DIY! Thanks for the links.

Still, if the low sound volume issue happened to you, please let me know what you did or where the problem was."

Stephen Moss offers:

"I have not owned a STe or personally come across this problem, however from looking at the circuit diagram there appears to be three Audio lines... AUDIOI (Audio in?), AUDIOS (Stereo Audio mixed to a mono channel?) and AUDIO. The Audio appears to be generated from U508 (LM1892?, page 10 of the PDF) as Left/Right audio which is them mixed together by U504 (LM347) to provide the audio feed to the video socket and so I would suspect one on these as the problem and it probably has

more to do with U504 then U508.

The first thing I would try it to compare the output from the Left/Right audio sockets to that of your Working STe, if it appears to be the same then you can eliminate U508. If you can eliminate U508 as the problem then compare the sound you get from the L/R audio sockets to the that coming from the video socket and see if you can tell if one channel or both channels are quite although ideally you would be better comparing them with an oscilloscope if you have access to one.

There are could be several causes for low volume as follows...
1) The output of U504 is defective.
2) Over time some of the resistor have gone high resistance, if either of the 10K resistors (R527, R5338) have gone high then the gain will be reduced and so the volume will decrease.
3) Capacitors (C529, C543) could have gone open circuit resulting is a loss of signal transfer to U504.

I think that is the area of the PCB you should be looking at but if all that appears to be fine then look at capacitor C416 and inductor L409 which are the final two components the audio goes through on it way to the video connector."

Guillaume Tello asks about his TT’s ST RAM board:

"I have a ST Ram expansion board in my TT with 2Mb on it. I heard that this could be changed to a 8Mb board just changing the ram chips, is it true?

The problem is that I can’t find any ST Ram board to sell at a normal price! If anyone has one..."

Roger Burrows tells Guillaume:

"Supposedly so, (about turning the 2 Meg board into an 8 Meg board), although I have not tried it myself. If you need the info, let me know - I have it printed out somewhere ...

They (ST RAM Boards) are not easy to find."

Lonny Pursell tells Roger, in reference to the documentation:

"If you still have this in electronic form I’d like to add it to the document archive, perhaps a (do it yourself) section."

Uwe Seimet adds:

"It might be easier to find TT-RAM boards.
Guillaume, do you already have TT-RAM in your TT? Since TT-RAM is considerably faster than ST-RAM adding TT-RAM sounds more promising to me than adding ST-RAM."

Guillaume tells Uwe:

"Yes for sure, I have a Magnum 64Mb (and maybe a TTRamide coming soon).

But... I need a lot of ST Ram to store and replay large sounds."

Mark Bedingfield does a little research on the TTRamide and tells Guillaume:

"Woh Mama. I just googled. looks like a nice idea. I toyed with the idea of designing a VME IDE controller for MegaSTE and TT030. Should finish that."

Well folks, that’s it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - The Atari 2600 Turns 30!
Wii Shortage This Holiday?
’Booze Cruise’ Reality Check!
And more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

The Atari 2600 Turns 30

Back in October of 1977, a little company known as Atari was hard at work manufacturing a console that would be a foundation for future video games to come. The Atari 2600 would introduce families to a new concept of video gaming that up until that time was mostly monochrome television tennis.

Originally known as the Atari Video Computer System (VCS), the console came packaged with two joystick controllers, a pair of paddle controllers, and the video cartridge game "Combat". The name was later changed in 1982 to the Atari 2600 upon the introduction of its successor console, the Atari 5200. The Atari 2600 was a fun gaming console for its time for an 8-bit gaming machine, and with the exception of a few spectacular bomb titles like "E.T.", the console helped launch third-party gaming developer companies such as Activision, which made many fun games for the 2600, like "Pitfall" for example.

Now mostly a collector item, the original Atari 2600 and gaming cartridges can still be found around the Internet if you want to get nostalgic. You

can also keep an eye out for the modern remake of the Atari 2600 called the Atari Flashback 2, released in 2005, which looks similar to a Atari 2600 and has 40 titles built right in to the console.

Nintendo Predicts Holiday Wii Shortage

The Nintendo Wii is about to celebrate its first birthday, but the shortages that held up profits last holiday season are threatening a repeat performance. That, combined with Microsoft's Halo 3 validating its hype, could mean a slower holiday season for Nintendo.

The Wii has far and away outsold Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360, despite the company's inability to manufacture enough consoles to keep up with demand. And now, Nintendo of America President Reggie Fils-Aime indicated he isn't confident Nintendo can produce enough machines for the holiday rush.

"We have been sold out worldwide since we launched," Fils-Aime was quoted by the San Jose Mercury News as saying. "Every time we put more into the marketplace, we sell more, which says that we are not even close to understanding where the threshold is between supply and demand."

With a statement like that, you have to wonder what is really going on, said Michael Gartenberg, an analyst at Jupiter Research. A company can certainly discover there is a far greater demand than market researchers anticipated for the launch, he explained, noting that companies can even have supply chain issues for months after a launch, especially with new technologies.

"Here we are nearly a year later and Nintendo is saying it is not going to meet the demand for Wiis," Gartenberg said. "At the end of the day, it's a very fine balance for consumers. They may in many cases hold out and get the device they are looking for. But if supply turns out to be too scarce, consumers may decide that it's time to look at other alternatives and other devices, and that can only bode well for both Microsoft and Sony."

What also bodes well, at least for Microsoft, is the blockbuster release of Halo 3. Fils-Aime told the Mercury News that Halo 3's impact on the console battle this holiday season is an open question. "I am fortunate to have a series of (games) that are all going to drive substantial sales for me and are all targeted to different parts of the consumer mix," Fils-Aime said.

Indeed, consumers who opt for the Wii tend to be looking for a more casual gaming experience than the intense shoot-'em-ups Microsoft and Sony offer. The Wii caters to a different market segment than the demographic that stood in line for hours to buy Halo. Still, analysts say there is no doubt that Halo 3 is a console-seller.

"People will buy the Xbox 360 on the strength of Halo 3 and how good that game is. If you are in the video game business, this is a situation you want to be in," Gartenberg said. "Of course, the good news for Microsoft is that Halo is a first party title. We are not going to be seeing Halo for the Wii or Halo for the PS3 any time soon."

’Heavenly Sword’

The hack-and-slash genre brings a certain mindless, yet simply satisfying, element to video games. Call it a quirk of gaming, but sometimes there’s just an odd pleasure in pressing the same few buttons over and over again.

"Heavenly Sword" (Rated T, $59.99) brings this game style to the PlayStation3 with Hollywood-caliber production values.

One of the most noticeable things about "Heavenly Sword" has nothing to do with action: this game has some of the best eyes in the business.

The action heroine, Nariko, shows quite an emotional range with her big brown eyes, slicing and dicing her way through hordes of armor-clad enemies with the game’s namesake, the Heavenly Sword.

Nariko’s haunting, beautiful looks are a stark contrast to the grim fact that this weapon is slowly draining her life.

The core gameplay puts you in control of Nariko, and she’s a one-woman army who battles King Bohan and his relentless quest to obtain this weapon of ultimate power.

There are better action games like this, notably the "God of War" series for the older PlayStation 2, from which this game clearly borrows heavily.

But "Heavenly Sword" benefits from lush graphics on the PS3 and looks amazing on a high-definition television.

The game offers some depth with combo moves and three ways to use the sword. When surrounded by enemies, switching stances between ranged, speedy and brute force attacks is a strategic decision.

There are some exciting interludes where you’ll have to tap the buttons at the right time to slide and run down giant ropes and onto a tower of waiting enemies, for example.

It’s like playing a movie at times, hardly a surprise with Andy Serkis, who played Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings" movies, once again pushing the boundaries of acting with a memorable turn as this game’s devious King Bohan.

With his mad desire for the Heavenly Sword, Serkis creates one of video gaming’s more memorable villains, showing more than the usual one-dimensional depth afforded most pixelated bad guys.

Not everything is heavenly in "Heavenly Sword."

Nariko isn’t alone in her quest to defeat Bohan, and occasionally you’ll partake in missions as the svelte Kai.

This is where the gameplay really breaks down. Amid countless acts of swordplay-driven heroism, you are interrupted with these very frustrating, out of place, shooting missions.

Kai has a few where she shoots her bow and arrow to kill swarms of baddies. Nariko too, gets sidetracked with levels that just seem out of place in a game about big honking swordplay.

"Heavenly Sword" doesn’t offer much replay value, either. Single player mode is the only game option available, and it won’t take skilled players more than a few days to complete.

But oh, what a gorgeous few days it will be.

Three stars out of four.

Booze Cruise Video Game Gives Teens Reality Check

The Canadian developers of a video game that simulates drunk driving hope it will make teenagers think twice about getting behind the wheel after a night of heavy drinking.

The game, aptly named ’Booze Cruise,’ was developed by Jim Parker, a digital-media professor at the University of Calgary, and a number of his students as a school project.

"The basic story is that this person is absolutely pissed and woke up in the trunk of their car and now is going to drive home," Parker said.

The player, with vision narrowed and blurred and reaction times slowed to mimic the reality of driving drunk, has 90 seconds to get home while navigating past obstacles that include pedestrians, other cars and a police checkpoint.

"And then just for fun, we put distractions on the side of the road, like pink elephants," Parker said.

Police in Calgary, Alberta, provided input as the team researched the game, trying to make it as realistic as possible. They also have high hopes for Booze Cruise.

"I think it’s going to be a great tool," said Const. Rob Haffner of the Calgary Police Service. "Whatever education that we can get out there is always going to be beneficial as far as drinking and driving goes."

Parker said the design team hopes to get funding to finish a more complete version before letting schools and police get their hands on the game.

While many teens are familiar with driving video games, Parker said the hope is that this one will persuade them that alcohol will affect their skills.

"This is aimed not at adults, this is aimed at people who are 13 to 16," he said. "We want to stop them from doing it in advance."

Bungie and Microsoft Part Company

Rumors circulating on the Internet for the past few days have proven to be true: Bungie Studios and Microsoft have parted company.

Bungie Studios - now renamed Bungie LLC - became a privately held

independent company, effective Oct. 1, 2007. Microsoft retains a minority equity interest in the new business, which will continue to focus on developing games for Microsoft platforms, according to Harold Ryan, Bungie s studio head.

Microsoft and Bungie indicated in announcing the separation that they will continue a "deep and long-term development and publishing relationship," focused both on the long-term success of the Halo franchise and on a new IP created and owned by Bungie.

That news is bound to come as a disappointment to Mac gamers who have longed for this day. From 1991 to 2000, Bungie was an independent game development company with a very strong focus on the Mac. It developed the Marathon first person shooter game series and Myth strategy game series; Marathon was a Mac-first title, along with a third-person action game called Oni.

Bungie announced its now-legendary first person shooter, on stage at Macworld Expo in New York in 1999, indicating the game would be released for Mac and Windows platforms. In 2000, Microsoft acquired the company, and announced that Bungie would become part of Microsoft s nascent game division, and that Halo would become an exclusive to the Xbox platform. Mac and Windows versions of the original Halo were ultimately released, although it would take a couple of years.

"Working with Microsoft was great for us, it allowed us to grow as a team and make the ambitious, blockbuster games we all wanted to work on," said Bungie founder and partner Jason Jones in a statement. And they will continue to be a great partner. But Bungie is like a shark. We have to keep moving to survive. We have to continually test ourselves, or we might as well be dolphins. Or manatees.

Bungie and Microsoft recently released Halo 3, an exclusive title for the Xbox 360. The game ran up $300 million in sales during its first week of release - the fastest-selling video game in history, according to Microsoft.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

EBay Urges Internet Access Tax Ban

An eBay executive warned Wednesday that fewer small businesses would sell products through the Web auctioneer, and elsewhere online, without a permanent ban on Internet access taxes.

Congress first imposed a moratorium on taxing Internet access - which bars state and local governments from taxing the connection to basic Internet content - in 1998. Since then, it has been twice extended, but is set to expire Nov. 1.

Congress is considering legislation that would extend the moratorium for several years or ban it permanently.

While Brian Bieron, eBay Inc.’s senior director of federal government relations, did not directly say the company would suffer without the ban, he said the effect would be far reaching.

"More importantly, fewer consumers will use the Internet," he said in testimony prepared for a House hearing. "And, for the small businesses using the Internet, that means fewer sales and less opportunity to compete with the mega retailers."

He estimated more than 720,000 small businesses use the San Jose, Calif.-based company as a primary or secondary marketing channel, calling it a "lifeline" against larger retailers.

Through eBay, he said about 15 percent of sales of U.S. small businesses are exported to other countries and small businesses can also find products from all around the world on the Web site.

Bieron was one of five witnesses to testify before the House Small Business Committee, which is considering the potential impact on small businesses if the moratorium isn’t renewed.

Rep. Nydia Velazquez, D-N.Y., who chairs the committee, said in her opening statement that if Internet access is taxed then small businesses could see a 15 to 30 percent increase in their Internet bills.

Americans Wrong About Computer Security

Most Americans believe their computers are protected against viruses and spyware, but scans found that a large number had outdated or disabled security software, according to a poll released on Monday.

Fully 87 percent of Americans polled said they had anti- virus software, 73 percent said they had a firewall and 70 percent said they had anti-spyware software, according to the survey by security software maker McAfee Inc and the National Cyber Security Alliance.

But when pollsters asked to remotely scan the respondents’ computers, the story turned out to be very different.

While 94 percent of those polled had anti-virus software, just half had updated it in the past month, the survey showed. Eighty one percent had a firewall protecting private information, but just 64 percent had enabled it. And 70 percent said they had anti-spyware software, but only 55 percent had enabled it.

Spyware not only monitors what a computer user does, but can also install software without the user’s consent and interfere with the computer in other ways.

Bari Abdul, a McAfee vice president, said most viruses were not written by attention-seeking hackers looking to pull a prank.

"Most of the action has gone to stealing identity," he said after speaking

at a cyber security conference sponsored by the National Cyber Security Alliance.

Nine percent of those polled reported having had their identity stolen, he said.

The survey questioned 378 people between Aug 2 and Sept 10 about security on their home computers. The Cyber Security Industry Alliance is seeking U.S. legislation to set standards for the government and private industry to prevent data breaches and tougher criminal penalties against spyware.

The Federal Trade Commission, which is one of several government agencies investigating cyber fraud, said on Monday it had stopped a scam that had infected 15 million computers.

Three men, who gave up the $330,000 they made from the scam, collected various forms of spyware and adware and used them to infect computers, the FTC said. They made money by putting adult ads on the computers and advertisements for Internet-based businesses or travel.

The unwanted software was hidden in free screen-savers and video files that users downloaded.

"Every time they infect a consumer, they're getting paid," said Ethan Arenson, one of the FTC lawyers who worked on the case.

FTC Chairman Deborah Majoras urged computer users to protect themselves against malicious software.

"I can tell you we have two dozen open investigations into data security," said Majoras. "We can't round up all the bad guys."

Majoras said she wanted to computer users to hit "delete" instead of "reply" when they get spam or email which is "phishing" for personal information that could be used for identity theft.

"Phishing absolutely drives me insane," she added.

Spam-Scam Crackdown Nets $2 Billion In Fake Checks

An international crackdown on Internet financial scams this year has yielded more than $2.1 billion in seized fake checks and 77 arrests in the Netherlands, Nigeria and Canada, U.S. and other authorities said on Wednesday.

The scammers, often West African organized crime groups, use ploys such as "spam" e-mail offering to pay recipients "processing fees" for depositing checks, which later turn out to be phony, and sending the ostensible proceeds to the scammer, authorities said.

The ruses are aided by U.S. financial practices that quickly credit a bank customer for deposits even though it can take far longer to discover a fake check and reclaim the money from the customer. The victims find themselves out the money they forward when the checks prove to be fake.

"Most Americans don't realize they are financially liable when they fall for these scams," Susan Grant, vice president of the National Consumers

League, said at a news conference to publicize the arrests and promote awareness of the frauds.

The crackdown netted 16 arrests in Nigeria, 60 in the Netherlands and one in Canada, said Greg Campbell, U.S. Postal Inspection Service inspector in charge of global security.

"We shut down Internet cafes, we arrested scammers, and significantly disrupted the flow of fake checks into the United States," Campbell said.

Law enforcement in England also took part. Nigeria is a recognized hotbed for the financial frauds and the other countries have significant West African populations that include fraud operators, authorities said.

Three suspects from the Netherlands and Nigeria were extradited to New York and are awaiting trial, said U.S. Assistant Attorney General Alice Fischer. The United States is seeking to extradite five others.

The United States is a major draw for the scammers. But other English-speaking countries are also targeted, in part because of the widespread use of English on the Internet and because of Nigeria’s large English-speaking population, Campbell said.

Nigeria has brought to court 290 cases of suspected fraud, and the prosecutions have been successful in 115 of the cases so far, said Ibrahim Lamorde, head of that country’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission.

He said Nigeria is doing its best to stamp out the fake-check operations. It has seized counterfeiting equipment and convened meetings of anti-fraud officials from across Africa. But he acknowledged Nigeria has an image problem.

"The first country that comes to mind is Nigeria," Lamorde said.

Two-thirds of Americans said they received at least one potential scam contact per week, and 18 percent said they or a family member had fallen for one, in a survey conducted for an alliance of banks, consumer groups and the U.S. Postal Service.

Grant said complaints to her group about fake checks have risen 60 percent this year, and the average victim loses about $3,000 to $4,000.

Some U.S. banks have changed their practices, for example, by training tellers to better inform depositors about risks, Grant said. She called for regulations mandating that bank customers be given clearer information.

Offers can also come in direct mail. Fisher showed hand-written envelopes directed to her at a Justice Department address.

Inside were $850 checks with a Wal-Mart logo, with letters offering her a 10 percent cut if she would cash the checks and send the money back. "After you laugh and think how silly it is .. this shows it (the problem) is just completely rampant," she said.

Yahoo, eBay Work To Block Phishing

Yahoo Inc, is working with auction leader eBay Inc and its PayPal payments unit to block fake e-mails to users purporting to be from eBay and PayPal, hoping to spur on an industry that has been slow to fight the scourge of so-called phishing attacks.

EBay and PayPal have upgraded their computer systems to support an emerging technology standard known as DomainKeys invented by Yahoo that authenticates e-mail senders are who they say they are, allowing Yahoo to block fake e-mails.

The technology upgrade will be made available to Yahoo Mail users worldwide over the next several weeks, the company said.

"It is a big step forward for consumers in defense against the bad guys," John Kremer, vice president of Yahoo Mail, said in a phone interview.

Along with banks and pharmaceutical makers, eBay and PayPal are among the brands most targeted by phishers seeking to trick consumers into divulging personal information such as credit card or password data in order to commit financial fraud.

Over the past decade, phishing has been clogging the inboxes of e-mail users worldwide with ever more sophisticated attempts to fool users into clicking on fraudulent sites or giving up personal financial details to commit fraud.

But to date, many of the defenses put forward by security software vendors and industry consortiums have failed to take hold with e-mail senders due to their complexity or costliness, or political in-fighting over standards, leaving individual consumers always guessing which e-mail may be real or fake.

A PayPal official said Yahoo’s system provides a way of automatically detecting potential phishing attacks without relying on the consumer to do anything new.

"If the consumer doesn’t receive an email in their inbox then it is very hard for the phisher to victimize them," Michael Barrett, PayPal’s chief information security officer.

Two camps have emerged among technology providers seeking to develop a coherent approach to identifying e-mail senders.

One backed by Yahoo and Cisco Systems Inc. along with AOL, Google Inc, International Business Machines Corp, Sendmail and VeriSign Inc is the DomainKeys Identified Mail technology, which allows e-mail providers to identify the Web domain from which a sender has sent e-mail.

A second standard known as Sender Policy Network (SPF) has been led by Microsoft Corp, which offers its own version of SPF known as Sender ID. SPF-based protections are used by Amazon, AOL, GoDaddy and eBay, which supports both DKIM and SPF.

Chenxi Wang, a security analyst with Forrester Research, said DomainKeys relies on more sophisticated cryptography than the Microsoft-supported approach. This sophistication can make DomainKeys harder for Web sites to install but offers greater long-term defense against phishing attacks, she said.

So far, most customers have installed sender authentication inside their

e-mail systems as a monitoring tool but do not block e-mail for fear of false positives - mistakenly treating legitimate customer e-mail messages as phishing attempts.

However, despite the industry disagreements, an underlying consensus is emerging among software vendors, Internet service providers and corporate Web sites that digital e-mail signing in one form or another is the best shot to combat phishing.

"Two years ago if you asked companies whether they were using e-mail authentication, most people wouldn't have cared," Wang said. "Today if you ask most organizations if they think it is a good thing people would say, 'Yes."'

"The industry is slowly coming around," Wang said. "EBay and PayPal are some of the first to actively block unauthenticated e-mails."

France Kicks Off Nationwide Spam Fight

France is hoping to shut down spammers more quickly through a system that makes it easier for users to notify ISPs (Internet service providers) when unsolicited e-mails are coming from their network.

The French government funded the development of an open-source toolbar for Microsoft's Outlook and Mozilla's Thunderbird e-mail programs that people can use to report suspected spam, said John Graham-Cumming, an Englishman who built the software for the project, called Signal Spam.

"From the French perspective, spam is like any other criminal activity that is affecting the French people," Graham-Cumming said.

Most users today simply delete spam email from their inboxes, in part because they don't have a simple tool for reporting spam to their ISP. The SignalSpam project aims to provide them with such a tool.

When users receive spam messages, the toolbar provides an easy way for them to forward the message to a central database. The messages are then sent to the ISP whose network they originated from, and the ISP decides whether to shut down the account of the sender, Graham-Cumming said.

France is ranked as the 10th worst country for generating spam, according to The Spamhaus Project Ltd., which publishes a list that can be used in e-mail servers to block known spamming IP (Internet protocol) addresses. The U.S. is the worst, followed by China, Russia and the U.K.

If a spam message originates outside of France, SignalSpam takes no action. If a message comes from a legitimate marketer, the system can send an automated response to the person who reported it telling them how to unsubscribe to the mailing list, Graham-Cumming said. Marketers are encouraged to register with Signal Spam.

The system's success will depend on people's willingness to install the tool bar. Since the project launched in May, about 3.5 million spam e-mails have been collected in the database, which can be used to generate statistics on spam trends.

By the end of the year, Signal Spam plans to release a toolbar for

Outlook Express, another Microsoft e-mail client, Graham-Cumming said. Signal Spam is also in talks with Web-based e-mail providers, such as Microsoft and Google Inc., on developing a reporting mechanism.

Some ISPs have been accused of profiting by allowing spammers to use their network, while other ISPs don't take action against spammers due to the expense of shutting them down. However, Signal Spam has received broad support from French ISPs, according to Graham-Cumming.

In the next couple months he expects the database to start to reveal spam trends that could shed greater light on how to stop the problem.

Eventually, Signal Spam may also turn its attention to closing phishing sites more quickly. Spam e-mails often try to entice people to a fraudulent Web site in order to trick them into divulging their personal information.

Online Videos May Be Conduits For Viruses

Online videos aren't just for bloopers and rants - some might also be conduits for malicious code that can infect your computer.

As anti-spam technology improves, hackers are finding new vehicles to deliver their malicious code. And some could be embedded in online video players, according to a report on Internet threats released Tuesday by the Georgia Tech Information Security Center as it holds its annual summit.

The summit is gathering more than 300 scholars and security experts to discuss emerging threats for 2008 - and their countermeasures.

Among their biggest foes are the ever-changing vehicles that hackers use to deliver "malware," which can silently install viruses, probe for confidential info or even hijack a computer.

"Just as we see an evolution in messaging, we also see an evolution in threats," said Chris Rouland, the chief technology officer for IBM Corp.'s Internet Security Systems unit and a member of the group that helped draft the report. "As companies have gotten better blocking e-mails, we see people move to more creative techniques."

With computer users getting wiser to e-mail scams, malicious hackers are looking for sneakier ways to spread the codes. Over the past few years, hackers have moved from sending their spam in text-based messages to more devious means, embedding them in images or disguised as Portable Document Format, or PDF, files.

"The next logical step seems to be the media players," Rouland said.

There have only been a few cases of video-related hacking so far.

One worm discovered in November 2006 launches a corrupt Web site without prompting after a user opens a media file in a player. Another program silently installs spyware when a video file is opened. Attackers have also tried to spread fake video links via postings on YouTube.

That reflects the lowered guard many computer users would have on such

popular forums.

"People are accustomed to not clicking on messages from banks, but they all want to see videos from YouTube," Rouland said.

Another soft spot involves social networking sites, blogs and wikis. These community-focused sites, which are driving the next generation of Web applications, are also becoming one of the juiciest targets for malicious hackers.

Computers surfing the sites silently communicate with a Web application in the background, but hackers sometimes secretly embed malicious code when they edit the open sites, and a Web browser will unknowingly execute the code. These chinks in the armor could let hackers steal private data, hijack Web transactions or spy on users.

Tuesday's forum gathers experts from around the globe to "try to get ahead of emerging threats rather than having to chase them," said Mustaque Ahamad, director of the Georgia Tech center.

They are expected to discuss new countermeasures, including tighter validation standards and programs that analyze malicious code. Ahamad also hopes the summit will be a launching pad of sorts for an informal network of security-minded programmers.

Tiny Linux Hits the Streets

A very small Linux operating system, known as Puppy Linux, has had a "major upgrade" after version 3.0 hit the streets this week.

What makes Puppy Linux different from other distributions of Linux is that the Puppy 3.0 Live CD can be run direct from the CD, without installing to a hard disk. Indeed, the operating system is just 97.6MB in size.

Puppy is designed to be a very small Linux operating system designed to be "reliable, easy to use and fully featured." The entire operating system and all the applications can be run entirely from RAM. It comes with applications such as SeaMonkey/Mozilla Application Suite, AbiWord, Sodipodi, Gnumeric, and Gxine/xine.

One of its most compelling features is that users can boot from the disk, work, and then save their files back to CD for the next time they boot the CD. It can also be run from USB storage sticks or Zip disks. This allows the Puppy operating system to be used on older computers, or as an emergency rescue system, a Linux demonstration system, or as a complete general purpose operating system.

According to developer Barry Kauler, Puppy Linux 3.0 is a major upgrade over previous releases. One of the major changes in this release is a move to make Puppy Linux and Slackware compatible to allow users to install Slackware packages on Puppy. Slackware is one of the oldest Linux distributions, and aims to be the most Unix-like Linux distribution.

"To that end, I used all the building block packages from Slackware 12, such as glibc 2.5, gcc 4.1.2 and gtk 2.10.13," said developer Kauler. "Most of the libraries in Puppy are now from Slackware. Note, though, this does not in any way make Puppy a clone of Slackware- apart from aiming for

binary compatibility, Puppy is fundamentally unique from the foundations upward."

Kauler has also "totally rewritten the key scripts that control how Puppy boots up, is configured, and shuts down." Other changes include better USB writing method, after "finally getting periodic flushing of RAM to Flash drive working properly- this is part of a mechanism that constrains writes to Flash drives so that they don’t burn out."

Sample Non-English Domains Coming Soon

Sample addresses in nearly a dozen languages will be added to the Internet’s central directories as early as next week, paving the way for Web surfers around the world to get online without knowing any English.

At this point, the 11 domain names are meant primarily for software developers and Web site designers to test the new system, but they are the first such names entered in the 13 key domain name directories, known as root servers, after years of discussions and limited-access tests.

If the global tests go well, non-English domain names could be in use by the end of 2008.

Users outside the United States long have clamored for non-English domain-name scripts, finding restrictive the current limitation to the letters a through z, the numbers 0 through 9 and the hyphen.

It is sometimes possible to create addresses in foreign languages, but the suffix - the ".com" part of an address - must use English characters. So the current tests involve non-English suffixes.

The 11 suffixes now under review will read "test" in Arabic, Persian, simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, Russian, Hindi, Greek, Korean, Yiddish, Japanese and Tamil.

They were chosen based on the online communities that have expressed the most interest in and need for non-English domains, said Tina Dam, director of the Internationalized Domain Names program for the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, known as ICANN, which oversees Internet addressing policies.

U.S. authorities are still reviewing the suffixes. They are expected to approve the test versions next week, and the tests will begin after that.

On Oct. 15, ICANN plans to unveil mechanisms for individuals and businesses to try out the new suffixes. They won’t be able to register domain names, but will be able to create Web sites and pass around non-English Web links. They will also be able to try locally popular Web browsers, beyond the major ones already tested.

Everyone in the world will essentially be invited to try to break the new system, Dam said. A 24-hour hot line is being established to allow ICANN to quickly suspend the test if any problems might disrupt other domains such as ".com" and ".uk."

The technology for the root servers themselves will not change. ICANN and the standards-setting Internet Engineering Task Force have instead

developed techniques - using a system known as Punycode - for software to convert the non-English domains into codes using only the 37 characters now permitted.

Among major browsers, only the one from Opera Software ASA fully implements Punycode, Dam said.

Users of Microsoft Corp.’s Internet Explorer, Mozilla’s Firefox and Apple Inc.’s Safari should be able to get to the Web sites, she said, but until developers finish their work, portions of the Web address may appear in English characters even after being entered in another language.

E-mail applications and Web-based mail systems ultimately will have to recognize Punycode as well. Approval of that technology is expected by year’s end.

www.sex.asia Likely To Be Internet Domain In Demand

The Internet address www.sex.asia is likely to be the domain name most in demand next week when dot Asia Web sites are launched, Europe’s .eu Internet domain registrar EURid said on Friday.

"No one knows which names will be most popular...but EURid’s experience offers some clues. In the first two days .eu domain names became available, EURid received 227 applications for sex.eu, 118 for hotel.eu and 94 for travel.eu," EURid said in a statement.

"The .asia registry will probably see the same rush for generic names but that will pass," said Marc Van Wesemael, general manager of EURid.

Dot asia addresses are due to become available from October 9. The distribution of the domain names is being managed by DotAsia Organisation (www.registry.asia), a not-for-profit group based in Hong Kong.

Feds Shut Down California’s Domain Name

The Federal government pulled the plug on the ca.gov Web domain used by the State of California on Tuesday, setting into motion a chain of events that threatened to grind government business to a standstill within the state.

State IT staffers were able to fix the problem within a few hours, narrowly averting disaster, but the situation shed light on what observers are calling a shocking weakness in the state’s IT infrastructure.

The story behind the shutdown, and how the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) came within hours of shutting down the State of California’s Internet presence is a complex one, but as with so many stories on the Internet, it begins with pornography.

In early September the Transportation Authority of Marin, a ten-person agency charged with managing transportation funding in Marin County, California, discovered that the servers that handled the agency’s Web and domain name service had been hacked and were being used to create links

to pornographic Web sites.

Domain name servers are used to translate the www.website.com domain names we type into our browsers into numerical IP addresses, used by computers. Together these Domain Name System (DNS) servers form a web-like database telling all of the computers on the Internet how to find each other. In the case of the Transportation Authority, there was one authoritative server responsible for telling all other DNS servers where to find computers operating within the tam.ca.gov domain.

The agency spent a frustrating two weeks trying to get its Internet service provider, StartLogic Inc., to resolve the problem, said Dianne Steinhauser, executive director of the Transportation Authority of Marin. Then in mid-September it delegated domain name server authority for the Transportation Authority's domain to the ca.gov name server, run by the state's Department of Technology Services, she said. That meant that the state's servers and not StartLogic's were now responsible for keeping the authoritative domain record for tam.ca.gov.

Unfortunately, it also meant that if an outside observer believed that the DNS server responsible for tam.ca.gov had been hacked, he might have assumed that the ca.gov name server was compromised as well. And that, apparently, is where the trouble really began for the State of California.

On Tuesday, at around 2 p.m., the federal organization responsible for managing the.gov top level domain pulled the plug on the ca.gov domain, according to Jim Hanacek, a public information officer with California's Department of Technology Services. The "ca.gov domain was removed as a valid address by the federal General Services Administration, who has an office that oversees the use of the.gov domain," he said.

Only the GSA knows for sure why this was done, but Hanacek said that the problems that had been experienced by the Transportation Authority of Marin were behind the move. "Our understanding... is they were seeing signs of some redirects over to pornographic sites and that is what caused them to shut down that domain."

A GSA spokeswoman did not dispute California's account of what happened, but said that her agency was looking into Tuesday's events and "will be able to provide an update once the details are gathered."

Security experts expressed amazement Wednesday that the federal government would undertake such a drastic move without first trying to resolve the problem with the state. "That's hard core, given how much stuff there is under ca.gov," said Cricket Liu, vice president of architecture with DNS appliance vendor Infoblox Inc. "Maybe they thought there was some sort of imminent threat."

Within hours of the GSA's move, the state had begun working with the federal agency to reverse the damage caused by delisting the ca.gov domain from the world's DNS servers, Hanacek said. Although there were some isolated reports of state Web sites being inaccessible or e-mail not going through, the disruption caused by the event was minimal and things were back to normal by 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

Because it takes time for DNS servers to update their records California managed to avoid disaster, but if Hanacek's office had not taken action within 24 hours, Web access and email to all state agencies using the ca.gov domain would have been cut off, Liu said. "It would have been crippling."

Hanacek said that the state is working with the GSA to make sure that this type of event doesn’t happen again. "I’m sure that we’ll have some processes in place to make sure that the right parties get advanced notification of a significant change like this."

Fridays Go From Casual To E-mail-Free

Overwhelmed by e-mail? Some professionals are fighting back by declaring e-mail-free Fridays - or by deleting their entire in-box.

Today about 150 engineers at chipmaker Intel will kick off "Zero E-mail Fridays." E-mail isn’t forbidden, but everyone is encouraged to phone or meet face-to-face. The goal is more direct, free-flowing communication and better exchange of ideas, Intel principal engineer Nathan Zeldes says in a company blog post.

E-mail-free Fridays already are the norm at cell carrier U.S. Cellular and at order-processing company PBD Worldwide Fulfillment Services in Alpharetta, Ga.

Prominent techies are tackling the problem individually by declaring "e-mail bankruptcy" - deleting or archiving an entire in-box and starting over. Among them: prominent tech bloggers Jeff Nolan, Michael Arrington and Vanessa Fox, and venture capitalist Fred Wilson.

E-mail overload is caused by the sheer volume of messages zipping around the globe. Each day, about 39.7 billion person-to-person e-mails, 17.1 billion automated alerts, and 40.5 billion pieces of spam (unsolicited commercial e-mail) are sent worldwide, researcher IDC says. White-collar workers often receive 140 messages a day, executive coach Marsha Egan says.

E-mail can be a useful communication tool, and people who write a lot of it are more likely to receive it, IDC (IDC) tech analyst Mark Levitt says. But it can quickly get out of hand.

"I didn’t even have time to figure out where to start," says Edward O’Connor, a Web developer from San Diego who declared e-mail bankruptcy two weeks ago. O’Connor had about 750 messages dating back three years, almost all of which needed a reply. "I was completely overwhelmed," he says.

Egan says even the busiest e-mailers can, with care, keep control of their in-boxes. Her tips:

* Don’t use e-mail to avoid unpleasant tasks. "I couldn’t believe people who had never talked to each other but worked in the same office," says Scott Dockter, CEO of PBD. Dockter started e-mail-free Fridays about a year-and-a-half ago. Since then, the number of messages his 400 employees send has dropped by about 75%.

* Don’t constantly check for new messages. It can take four minutes to refocus on work after checking an e-mail, Egan says. Jay Ellison, chief operating officer of U.S. Cellular, estimates that his 7,000 employees spend about 1´‰ hours a day on their in-boxes. E-mail-free Fridays give them more time to solve customers’ problems, he says.

* Respond to important messages first - even if they’re difficult. Less-pressing issues can wait until a free moment, Egan says.

’National Telework Week’ Gets A Show Of Congressional Support

The federal government has a special day, week, or month for everything, so why not telecommuting?

U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf, a Virginia Republican, has promoted the idea by sending a letter requesting the creation of a "National Telework Week" to President Bush and introducing a resolution to promote the idea. Wolf said he wants to encourage more employers to consider the option.

"The best part of telework is that it improves the quality of life for all," Wolf said in his written statement Tuesday. "Nearly 20 million Americans telework today, and according to experts, at least 40% of American jobs are compatible with telework. Telework reduces traffic congestion and air pollution. It reduces gas consumption and our dependency on foreign oil."

Wolf said telework provides parents with flexibility to meet personal and professional demands, increases opportunities for people with disabilities, and helps fill the nation’s labor market shortage. He also said that companies reap benefits, including cost savings, lower absentee rates, increased retention, higher productivity, and improved morale.

He also cited George Mason University research showing that for every 1% of the Washington metropolitan region workforce that telecommutes, traffic delays drop by 3%.

"Just a few weeks ago the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M University released its annual traffic congestion study which calculates that congestion creates a $78 billion annual drain on the U.S. economy due to 4.2 million lost hours of productivity and 2.9 billion gallons of wasted gas," he said. "That’s not even considering the air pollutants caused by idling vehicles around the nation."

Wolf pointed out that leaders in the Office of Personnel Management and General Services Administration support telework and want to promote it within the federal government.

"National Telework Week would be an ideal time for employers, for just one day during one week of the year, to allow employees to work from home or an alternative work site to find out the benefits of telework," Wolf said. "It’s time to give it a shot."

Wolf said "work is something you do, not someplace you go."

"Hopefully we can make telework as commonplace as the morning traffic report," he added. "There is nothing magical about strapping ourselves into a car and driving sometimes up to an hour and a half, arriving at a workplace and sitting before a computer. We can access the same information from a computer in our living rooms."

Lexmark Offers Online Rewards Program for Recycling Ink

While they say that the best things in life are free, the best things should also be good for the environment.

On Tuesday, Lexmark announced an online rewards program letting consumers receive free inkjet cartridges for returning them.

Here’s how the program works: buy five ink cartridges from Lexmarkstore.com (no other retailer) within a 12-month period, then you’ll receive one ink cartridge for free. Next, if you return those five empty cartridges to Lexmark within that 12-month period, you can get a second free cartridge. Basically, consumers can receive two free cartridges for every five bought and returned.

So it’s either 5 purchases or 5 returns (or both) within the required period. The good news is, if you buy a tri-pack of eligible cartridges, then that counts as three cartridge purchases.

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